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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE

HONORS COLLEGE

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR HONORS IN THE DEGREE OF

BACHELOR OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, AND PHILOSOPHY

COLLEGE OF LETTERS AND SCIENCES

BY

BAILEY ANNE MELTON

COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

2024

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FROM VICTORIAN DOUBT TO AMERICAN DECONSTRUCTION: EXPLORING FAITH CRISES ACROSS TIME AND GEOGRAPHY

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Bailey Anne Melton

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Approved by

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ABSTRACT

This research consists of a comparative analysis of faith crises in two distinct historical periods: the Victorian era (1830s-1914) and modern America. Through examining the Victorian crisis of faith and the contemporary American deconstruction movement within Protestant Evangelicalism, this study explores the common themes, diverse responses, and enduring relevance of faith doubt within Christianity. The Victorian crisis emerged amidst scientific advancements, theological debates, and shifting societal norms, prompting intellectuals to grapple with doubts about traditional Christian beliefs. Prominent figures publicly challenged religious orthodoxy, while evolving scientific theories, particularly evolution, further fueled skepticism. In contrast, the American crisis of Evangelicalism is characterized by disillusionment with Evangelical stances on social and political issues, leading to theological reevaluation and controversy among Americans. This comparative analysis illuminates shared challenges across different historical contexts, highlighting the complex interplay between faith, doubt, and societal change. By exploring these faith crises through a comparative lens, this study provides insight into the evolving nature of religious beliefs and their impact on individuals and communities.

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Lastly, but most importantly, thank you to my parents, Brad and Cheri Melton. You both have always championed and supported my academic endeavors, pushing me to excel at whatever I set out to accomplish. Your support both emotionally and spiritually was instrumental in providing a space that not just helped me complete this thesis, but all 4 years of university. Considering the nature of this research and our religious background, the fact that I felt comfortable not just telling you about my thesis but being in constant discussion about the topics I explore here, is a testament to the accepting and intellectually stimulating environment our home was, a place where I could ask the tough theological questions without being rejected. Without your support, this paper, any of my studying abroad, and the last 4 years, would not have been possible.

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INTRODUCTION

As America's largest subset of Protestant Christians, Evangelicals have a prominent role in society, politics, and the church.[1] A seemingly recent movement of individuals critiquing and leaving Evangelicalism has given cause for concern within Christian circles. This is far from the first faith crisis that has affected Christianity. For instance, Victorian Britain (1830s-1914) suffered a crisis of faith during the nineteenth century that led to large speculation that the country had largely begun to become irreligious (though scholars argue this began later in the twentieth century). This essay will show that while the Victorian and American crises of faith are separated by time and geographical location, both movements share striking similarities and are quite complex. Following a review of the literature and a discussion on the historical and religious contexts that shaped both Victorian Britain and Evangelical America (and importantly explain what "Evangelical" even means), an exhaustive research study will explore the reasons why these faith crises were/are happening. While understanding the nuance of investigating an ongoing faith crisis, and the intricate issues this creates, this research is a comparative analysis that uses the Victorian crisis of faith as a lens to view the ongoing American faith crisis. This paper argues that far from being caused by individuals asking inconsequential questions, the criticisms from the people leaving American Evangelicalism are similar, though not identical, to those critiques raised by Victorian intellectuals.

[1] "America's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center*, May 12, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a radical shift in the historiography surrounding the religiosity of Victorian Britain, with the older scholarly perspective concluding that Britain developed into a more secularized society during the Victorian period. Recent historians, such as Susie Steinbach, Timothy Larsen, and Francis Knight, have convincingly argued that the Victorians continued to remain a society deeply impacted by religious ideology and tradition.[2] Steinbach and Knight have both explored how the scholars came to this narrow-sighted conclusion by exclusively focusing on church attendance numbers.[3] Furthermore, Knight has explored how Sunday church attendance would have been considered the most "mechanical" religious act, and as such is not an accurate measure of an individual's religiosity.[4] Additionally, Larsen has proposed that the reason many still believe that Britain was becoming more secularized was due to previous scholarship focusing mainly on the state-established Angelical church, but once Nonconformist denominations are analyzed side-by-side with their Anglican counterparts, many of the popular beliefs surrounding Victorian Christians are not justifiable.[5] It is clear from this turn in the historiography that Britain was far from secularization and that religion continued to affect many aspects of society and public culture throughout the Victorian period.

The scholarship specifically surrounding the Victorians' crisis of faith has also vastly changed over time. More recent historians, such as Timothy Larsen, Frank Turner, and S. J. D. Green, have concluded that the Victorians' crisis of faith that came about in the nineteenth century

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[2] Susie Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2023), 311; Francis Knight, *The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22.
[3] Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians,* 260.
[4] Knight, *Nineteenth Century Church and English Society,* 75.
[5] Timothy Larsen, *Contested Christianity: The Political and Social Contexts of Victorian Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 2.

is much more nuanced and complex than previous research explored.[6] Larsen argues that the intensely religious nature of the Victorian era is largely ignored in works in Victorian studies in favor of promoting a view that Victorians largely lost their faith.[7] Both Turner and Larsen successfully argue that the belief that Britain as a whole experienced a crisis of faith is mostly due to the fact the older research focused only on the upper-middle-class intellectuals rather than an equal focus on the working, middle, and upper classes.[8] While it is true that the intellectuals were experiencing a faith crisis, to use them to characterize the whole population is a misrepresentation of the historical facts. As the scholarship surrounding the Victorians' crisis of faith continues to evolve, research on the American faith crisis is gradually emerging.

While the history of American Evangelicalism and its role in America, specifically politics, has been well documented, when it comes to the American faith crisis, a significant amount of secondary scholarly research has yet to be published, this is unsurprising, as most consider that the crisis is ongoing. However, there are some significant exceptions to this. Stephen Bullivant in *Nonverts: The Making of ex-Christian America*, details the multiple accounts of individuals who come from a variety of Christian traditions (including Evangelicalism but also includes discussions on Roman Catholicism and Mormonism) who now identify as nonreligious.[9] Andrew Hermann in Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness, explores how American Evangelicalism is losing adherents due to its history and stances on issues dealing with gender by analyzing the

[6] Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-2; S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3; Frank Turner, "The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith That was Lost," in *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief,* eds. Richard Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman, eds. (Stanford: Standford University Press, 1990), 9-10.
[7] Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt*, 2.
[8] Ibid; 4-5; Frank Turner, "The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith That was Lost," 12.
[9] Stephan Bullivant, *Nonverts: The Making of ex-Christian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

#ChurchToo and #Exvangelicals movements.[10] Additionally, while writing for Washington University in St. Louis's *Religion & Politics*, Bradley Onishi details the history of the term #exvangelical. It will be necessary for academia to continue to provide resources detailing the reasons for and effects (or lack thereof) that the exodus of individuals from American Evangelicalism has had on both Evangelicalism itself and American Christianity in general. The research presented here will contribute to the limited existing body of scholarly research available on the faith crisis of American Evangelicalism.

METHODOLOGY

The research conducted for this thesis employed a qualitative approach to analyze both the Victorian and American faith crises. For the analysis of the people and reasons behind the Victorian crisis of faith, an in-depth analytical review was conducted on both primary resources and secondary scholarly literature. Several primary sources are directly quoted and a link to a digitized version of the primary sources is included in the footnotes. Larsen noted that discussions on the Victorian faith crisis were encouraged by the literature that was used to communicate on a wider scale by both the individuals involved in and critical of the faith crisis, and in turn, that is what is analyzed here and in the broader scholarly discourse of the Victorian faith crisis.[11]

Because not much secondary research has been conducted on the American faith crisis, an extensive amount of analysis of primary sources occurred to provide the reasons for and determine who engages in the ongoing American faith crisis. A variety of sources were analyzed to highlight the nuanced perspectives of those participating in the faith crisis and those still within American Evangelicalism. Due to the inherently digital nature of the American faith crisis, the

[10] Andrew Hermann, "Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness," in *International Review of Qualitative Research* 13, no. 4, (2020). https://doi.org/10.1177/1940844720937813.
[11] Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt*, 10-11.

primary sources are a diverse collection of podcasts, YouTube video essays, social media posts (X, Instagram, Reddit, Facebook), books, and articles.[12] Every primary source cited will include a URL link for ease of access, except for the books consulted.[13] While the faith crisis of Evangelical Americans might not yet have a prominent role in the scholarly secondary research, the research presented here is an early attempt at contextualizing the faith crisis of American Evangelicalism within the scholarship surrounding broader Christian faith crises.

What brought about this analysis comparing the American and Victorian faith crises was the recent argument from those participating in the American crisis that their doubt and complex faith journeys are not new, which they cite historical and even biblical precedents in their explanations. For example, Eric Sentell, a self-identifying Progressive Christian, argues that the biblical figures of Moses, Paul, and even Jesus researched, studied, and formed opinions and beliefs that differed from the theological teachings of their youth.[14] Andre Henry, writing for *Religion News Service*, envisions Martin Luther as undertaking the process of "interrogating, reevaluating, and often shedding Christian doctrines," which Henry argues, parallels what Americans are currently participating in.[15] While this view of the American faith crisis has not gone unnoticed or uncritiqued by American Christians (as will be explored later in this paper), it is interesting that there is currently a significant absence in academic or public discourse that is

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[12] Podcasts and YouTube video essay/interviews were the primary resources most extensively analyzed. These resources have been created by both those inside and those critiquing Evangelicalism. While the podcasts analyzed are available on all streaming platforms, Spotify was exclusively used by the researcher. Additionally, while in a few places social media posts are directly cited, this was used more as a research tool to find longer and more comprehensive sources, such as podcasts, interviews, books, etc. An additionally resource will always be linked with a social media post. For further resource on the role that digital spaces have in in deconstruction, see: Steven Fekete and Jessica Knippel, *The Devil You Know: An Exploration of Virtual Religious Deconstruction Communities,"* in *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 9 (2020): 165-184.

[13] These links are updated and working as of April 2024.

[14] Eric Sentell, "A Short Unofficial History of Faith Deconstructionists," *Medium*, February 24, 2022, https://medium.com/backyard-theology/a-short-unofficial-history-of-faith-deconstructionists-f80ccb72639c.

[15] Andre Henry, "Deconstruction is a Valid Christian Practice. Ask Martin Luther," January 5, 2022, https://religionnews.com/2022/01/05/deconstruction-is-a-valid-christian-practice-ask-martin-luther/.

drawing parallels between the American and Victorian faith crisis. Therefore, this research was undertaken to first explore, and then successfully argue, that the Victorian and American faith crises share striking similarities, while also acknowledging these two movements' nuanced differences.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Defining "Evangelical(ism)"

It is critical to define what an Evangelical is, what the historic definition has been, and what their role(s) in America have been in the past and present, which is quite a complex undertaking. In his profound work *Religion, Religions, Religious*, Jonathan Z. Smith argued that the term "religion" is used and defined outside of any said "religion," by academics to better define/classify groups of people, and because of this complexity, religion is up for constant reinterpretation.[16] Michael Altman, using Smith's arguments for religion as a lens, comes to a similar analysis of the word Evangelical(ism), specifically with its use in America, determining that Evangelical(ism) is identical to religion in that there is a variety of definitions that are valid and used by others rather than just self-identifying Evangelicals.[17] Furthermore, Linford Fisher argues that the defining "of a stable "evangelicalism" throughout American history is a result of a particular set of developments, both historically and historiographically, which historians themselves helped to shape."[18] Taking the arguments of Smith, Altman, and Fisher into account, there is a clear pattern of historians and scholars, Christians or otherwise, that explicitly define evangelicalism. David Bebbington, in his seminal work *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain,*

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[16] Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies,* ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269, 281-82.
[17] Michael J. Altman, ""Religion, Religions, Religious" in America: Toward a Smithian Account of "Evangelicalism."" *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 31, no. 1 (2019): 77-78, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26642785.
[18] Linford D. Fisher, "Evangelicals and Unevangelical: The Contested History of a Word, 1500-1950," in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 26, no. 2 (2016): 185, https://doi.org/10.1525/rac.2016.26.2.184.

defines an Evangelical as an individual who believes in *conversionism* (a personal transformation brought on by an experience with God), *biblicism* (a belief in the truthfulness and inerrancy of the Bible), *crucicentrism* (the belief in the centrality of the cross in the Gospel story), and *activism* (the outward manifestation brought on by a personal conversion).[19] Bebbington came to this understanding of the word Evangelicalism by studying the Victorians, expanding his definition from the writings of the British politician George W.E. Russell.[20] Not only have academic scholars largely accepted Bebbington's definition as sound, but even the American National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) directly points to Bebbington's definition to define what an Evangelical is.[21] Even so, some disagree with this definition when used in the American context.

While Bebbington's definition is a helpful starting point, Timothy Demy and Paul Shockley have justly reasoned that Evangelicalism, while being a universal movement, is also greatly shaped by its host nation.[22] Many scholars, such as Anthea Butler and Kristin Kobes Du Mez, share a quite different definition of *Evangelical* than Bebbington's traditional one. Butler explains that in America, Evangelicalism means different things (both theologically and politically) based on different periods, but she concludes that there was a defining movement in the 1970s to redefine Evangelicalism as politically aligning itself with the American Republican Party and overall right-wing conservative politics.[23] Butler sees Evangelicalism in America post-1970 as being a white institution that upholds and was built on the foundations of racism and sexism.[24] Du Mez has written that an understanding of Evangelicalism is dependent on a "world

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[19] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 3, 5-7, 10,12, 14-15.
[20] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 3.
[21] "What is an Evangelical?" *National Association of Evangelicals*, The National Association of Evangelicals, accessed March 4, 2024. https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/.
[22] Timothy Demy and Paul Shockley, *Evangelical America: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Religious Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2017), xvii-iii.
[23] Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 3-5.
[24] Ibid, 10.

beyond the faith."[25] Du Mez and Stephen Bullivant point to the extensive culture that Evangelicals have created by way of Christian-themed books, movies, music, news sources, etc., and recognize these creations as important in identifying Evangelicalism's importance and more importantly, its influence in America.[26] In short, for them, Evangelicalism is a predominately white and patriarchal-supporting institute whose main goal is to implement conservative and right-wing political objectives. One of the toughest challenges in defining Evangelicalism in America is that the individuals who define themselves as such could come from a variety of different Christian church denominations. It is crucial to understand that when used, the term "Evangelicalism" refers to, for the most part, separate ideologies within both Victorian and American contexts. For clarity within the following investigation that delves into the American crisis of faith, it should be noted when the term "evangelical(ism)" is used, it is more so the cultural and political definition of White Evangelicalism that is being utilized rather than the more theologically focused definition of Bebbington. Furthermore, for the Victorians, Evangelicals are more closely defined by Bebbington's definition, while the American Evangelicals are defined by the political and cultural definition.

The Religiosity of Victorian Britain

To understand Victorian Britain as being something other than a society deeply informed by religion would be a mischaracterization of history. Supporting this idea of a religious society and culture, Philip Williamson has documented the many types of national worship days that were commemorated before 1860 in both the established church and Nonconformist

[25] Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020) p. 9.
[26] Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 13-15; Bullivant, *Nonverts*, 131-32.

denominations.[27] After 1859, nationwide prayers and holy days continued to be celebrated but mostly informally and only by the established church. Williamson argues that state-mandated religious observances were indicative of a national religious revival.[28] He concluded that the eventual decline in these ceremonies was primarily caused by the political agendas of the nation's prime ministers rather than a diminishing importance placed on religion by the general population. It was also during this time that Victorians saw a decline in the political and governmental influence that was carried by the Church of England.[29] Steinbach credits the changes to the political and governmental influence carried by religious leaders not to secularization but rather to Britain beginning to realize it was a "religiously pluralistic country."[30] Regarding religious pluralism, within Britain during this time existed two main forms of Protestant Christianity, the state-established Church of England and a multitude of Nonconformist denominations.[31] In addition to the established church, many Nonconformist denominations, including Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, and Congregationalists, among others, were all present and making a difference in Britain's religious landscape.[32] Specifically for the Nonconforming Protestant denominations, *advocating* for religious pluralism made them stand out significantly from The Church of England. The crisis of faith that the Victorians eventually witnessed affected individuals who were a part of both the established church and the Nonconformist denominations.

Furthermore, just like Victorian society, Victorian politics were intrinsically religious during this time. Ironically, though, it was the Nonconformists who began to support the notion

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[27] Philip Williamson, "State Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgiving: Public Worship in Britian 1830-1897," *Past & Present* 200, no. 1 (2008): 124, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25096722.
[28] Ibid., 153-155.
[29] Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians*, 312, 315.
[30] Ibid.
[31] William Ravenhill, "Religion of the United Kingdom," Encyclopedia Britannica, Britannica, accessed March 15, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom/Religion.
[32] Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation: 1846-1886* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 428; Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians*, 318-322.

that there should be a strong separation between church and state, rather than those part of the faith crisis.[33] While wanting to separate church and state functions might at first seem quite secularistic, many non-conformists had deep theological reasoning for wanting to separate themselves from the state-established church. Because these groups tied into their theology ideas such as the voluntariness of belief and worship and independence from all higher authority except God, these groups wanted little to no involvement from the state.[34] Congregationalist clergyman, John A. James, further explained that religious state establishments could injure religion's "reputation by exposing it to the suspicion and the charge of being a mere system of craft, by which the priest is bribed to help the king."[35] Larsen has persuasively argued that the debate surrounding the separation of church and state has been used to support the theory of secularization, when in fact it was the Christian Nonconformists who publicly supported the idea of moving further away from the government's influence.[36] Nonconformist denominations forever changed Christian religiosity in Britain through their different styles of worship, dissenting theological views, and their focus on societal change and religious freedom, both for themselves and other religious groups. Nineteenth-century Britain was not a society embracing secularization, but rather a society that encountered a large amount of change and religious diversity, which eventually gave way to a group of societal elites questioning their faith traditions.

American Evangelicalism

Christianity in America has **always** had a place in society, but unlike Britain, America does not have an official state-sponsored religion. Christianity has **always** had a prominent role in

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[33] Timothy Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), 253-55.
[34] Larsen, *Contested Christianity*, 149, 153.
[35] John A. James, *The Principles of Dissent, and the Duties of Dissenters: A Pastor's Address to his People* (London: Hamilton Adams & Co, 1861), 11.
[36] Larsen, *Contested Christianity*, 2.

American history, and Evangelicals' role in politics has also always been politically influential but exploring that is far beyond the scope of this research. Understanding the nature of the faith crisis involves recognizing Evangelicalism's significant and powerful alignment with right-wing conservative politics. When researching American Evangelicalism, it is clear that there was a shift in the second half of the twentieth century that highlights a change in how white Evangelicals viewed their influence in American culture and politics.[37] Many Evangelicals began to move away from the historical understanding of what it meant to be an Evangelical and aligned themselves with the Republican party.[38] The most prominent way that this change took place was through the formation of political action groups, that had varying degrees of success. In 1979, the future founder of the staunchly Evangelical Liberty University, Jerry Falwell Sr, started the political lobbyist organization, The Moral Majority, which was one of the first and largest Christian political organizations and it dramatically affected conservative politics, specifically in assisting in the successful election of Ronald Reagan, a Republican, as 40th President.[39] The Moral Majority, supporting issues such as prayer in schools and opposing homosexuality and abortion, did not see long-term success and disbanded in 1989.[40] On the other hand, James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* (*FotF*), also founded in 1979, continues to be an active and impactful example of Evangelical culture and Evangelicals' connection with right-wing conservative politics. *FotF*'s stated mission is to evangelize "by nurturing and affirming the God-ordained institution of the family and proclaiming biblical truths worldwide."[41] This organization provides a variety of resources and programs that target children, youth, parents, and families, and

[37] Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1-3.
[38] Butler, White Evangelical Racism, 3-4.
[39] Demy and Shockley, *Evangelical America: Encyclopedia,* 291-292.
[40] Ibid.
[41] "Our Vision," *Focus on the Family*, accessed March 28, 2024, https://www.focusonthefamily.com/about/foundational-values/.

while *FotF* is certainly not the only organization to create and sell Christian-based material, they have consistently been one of the most prominent groups. To legally exert explicit political influence, *FotF* created the lobbyist group, the *Family Research Council* (which legally separated from *FotF* in 1992), which focuses on a variety of causes, most prominently opposition to abortion and LGBT rights and advocating for religious freedoms.[42] The relationship between the Evangelicals and the Republican Party is as strong as ever, with data from the Pew Research Center showing that in 2020, 78% of registered voters who self-identify as White Evangelicals lean towards or support the Republican Party.[43] These two Christian political organizations, among others, played very dynamic and influential roles in establishing conservative Christians as an active political group that firmly aligned itself with the Republican Party.

It is important to understand that not every American Christian is an Evangelical, and not every Evangelical considers themselves conservative, either theologically or politically.[44] Todd Couch has written on the existence of Evangelicals who reject the conflation of right-wing politics and Evangelicalism, while George Yancey and Ashlee Quosigk have written on how both Progressive and Evangelical Christians place an equally substantial amount of importance on politics.[45] Brantley Gasaway has documented the role that Progressive Evangelicals have and also the backlash that these Progressives faced, such as when Jerry Falwell claimed that Progressives

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[42] Peter Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 91-92; Demy and Shockley, *Evangelical America: Encyclopedia,* 159-160.
[43] "In Changing U.S. Electorate, Race and Education Remain Stark Dividing Lines," *Pew Research Center*, June 2, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/06/02/in-changing-u-s-electorate-race-and-education-remain-stark-dividing-lines/.
[44] Smith, *Christian America?*, 22.
[45] George Yancey and Ashlee Quosigk, *One Faith No Longer: The Transformation of Christianity in Red and Blue America* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 36-37; Todd Couch, "Red Letter Christianity: Liberation Theology and Trumpism Amongst Evangelicals," *Age of Revolutions*, September 26, 2022, https://ageofrevolutions.com/2022/09/26/red-letter-christianity-liberation-theology-and-trumpism-amongst-evangelicals/.

were "on the lunatic fringe of the Evangelical movement."[46] While this research is focused on the experience within, and critiques of, predominately white American Evangelicalism, recognizing the history of Black and Latino Evangelicals is important. For example, Samuel Rodriguez is a very prominent and outspoken Hispanic Evangelical leader who helped establish the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.[47] The National Black Evangelical Association began in the 1960s and many within this organization hold more theologically conservative beliefs, but their political and social views are more progressive than the majority of white Evangelicals.[48] Furthermore, according to data collected by the Pew Research Center, over the last few years, there has been an increase in Black Protestantism among those identifying as "born-again/Evangelical."[49] While understanding those who identify as Evangelicals can vary in both theological and political beliefs and by race, the current faith crisis facing America is largely being undertaken by former Evangelicals who are critiquing the beliefs of the overwhelmingly white and politically conservative Evangelicals.[50]

THE REASONS AND RESPONSE TO THE VICTORIAN FAITH CRISIS

The faith crisis of the Victorians has always been a source of great scholarly interest, but as argued previously, historians have realized that secularization *did not* take place on a significant scale during the Victorian era.[51] Additionally, it has been successfully argued that it was mostly only the intellectuals, concentrated predominantly in the upper-middle class, that were

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[46] Brantley Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 3.
[47] Demy and Shockley, *Evangelical America: Encyclopedia,* 207-08.
[48] Ibid., 300-01; Ronald Potter, "The New Black Evangelicals," *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 1 *(1979),* https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637320902759.
[49] Gregory Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," *Pew Research Center,* December 14, 2021, https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/12/PF_12.14.21_update_on_religion_trends_report.pdf,
[50] Demy and Shockley, *Evangelical America: Encyclopedia,* 334-38.
[51] David Nash, "Reassessing the 'Crisis of Faith' in the Victorian Age: Eclecticism and the Spirit of Moral Inquiry," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16, no. 1 (2001) 65-66, https://sci-hub.st/10.1080/13555502.2011.554676.

involved in this faith crisis, rather than the whole of Britain. An intellectual, as defined by Avrom Fleishman, is someone who "operate[s] in distinct social roles, and exercise[s] or attempts to exercise, ethical and perspectival influence in the society in which [they] work."[52] The circles of these intellectuals consisted of a variety of people including writers, doctors, pastors, politicians, scientists, public critics, and so on. Understanding the beliefs and reasons for the faith crisis of the intellectuals is instrumental in understanding why this crisis occurred. Additionally, this look to the past can provide valuable insight into the ongoing American faith crisis. This research will show that Evangelicalism, the evolution of science, and the evolving role of women in society were instrumental catalysts for skepticism held for religion by the intellectuals.

Evangelicalism

Larsen clearly defines Evangelicalism and the religiosity of the Victorians as being a driving force behind the intellectuals' faith crisis and how "Evangelicalism strove to erase the space between outward conformity and one's inner thoughts and life."[53] Frank Turner has convincingly argued this by pointing out that doubt and crisis are not brought on by religion that is viewed as passive and non-oppressive but 'rather it is expansive, intensified religion' that brings about "personal crisis and inner conflict."[54] Furthermore, Turner argues that the intensified Protestant religiosity of the mid-1800s was brought on by the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act.[55] The amount of writings from Victorian Evangelicals is evidence that the crisis was something that Christians perceived and were concerned about.[56] David Hempton has furthered this belief by claiming that "Evangelicals…established more rigorous criteria for acceptable [Christian]

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[52] Avrom Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.
[53] Evangelicalism as defined by David Bebbington (refer to previous section "What is Evangelicalism"); Larsen *Crisis of Doubt*, 10, 12.
[54] Turner, "The Victorian Crisis of Faith," 15.
[55] Ibid., 13.
[56] Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 130, 222.

devotion which almost certainly alienated as many as they were able to attract."[57] James Moore has gone as far as to claim that "most of those [Victorians] who called themselves 'agnostics' had an Evangelical background."[58] Evidence of this is found in the life of Mary Ann Evans (pen name George Eliot), who will be explored later in this research, as she was a strong Evangelical in her youth but eventually doubted and publicly critiqued organized Christianity.[59] Evidently, Evangelicalism emerged as a pivotal catalyst in driving intellectuals toward a crisis of faith.

The Evolution of Science

Turner argues that there were a large number of intellectuals who believed in or at least feared that there was a conflict between the tenants of science and Christianity and concludes that by the end of the Victorian era, there were "substantial developments" in the sciences that "challenged or cast into doubt theological assumptions and portions of the Bible."[60] Henry Van Dyke, while disagreeing on a theological level, believes that the general skepticism of religion is popularly believed to be due to "the progress of science."[61] On the other hand, George Levine quite clearly describes Thomas Huxley as viewing religion as "the enemy of knowledge."[62] Charles Darwin, through his theory of evolution, introduced a new way of interpreting the "creation" and proceeding developments of every species on earth, including humans.[63] The

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[57] David Hempton, "Established Churches and the Growth of Religious Pluralism: A Case Study of Christianisation and Secularization in England since 1700," in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000,* eds. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 91.

[58] James Moore, "Theodicy and Society: The Crisis of the Intelligentsia," in *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief,* eds. Richard Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman, eds. (Stanford: Standford University Press, 1990), 173.

[59] Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life*.

[60] Frank Turner, "The Victorian Conflict between Science and Religion: A Professional Dimension," *Isis* 69, no. 3 (1978), 356-57. https://www.jstor.org/stable/231040.

[61] Henry Van Dyke, *The Gospel for an Age of Doubt* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1900), 9, https://archive.org/details/gospelforageofdo0000vand_e1n4/page/8/mode/2up?q=evangelical.

[62] George Levine, "Scientific Discourse as an Alternative to Faith," in *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief,* eds. Richard Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman, 225.

[63] "Darwin's Faith," The Wilson Quarterly 5, no. 3 (1981): 32, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45265306.

theory of evolution caused the accuracy and inerrancy of the Bible to be called into question by many Victorians.[64] Additionally, the work completed by Charles Lyell in his book, *Principles of Geology*, was an "attack on traditional earth science and natural theology," according to Michael Tomko.[65] Even so, the response of the intellectuals to scientific developments, specifically Darwinism, was never uniformly in favor of such advancements.[66] As Paul Croce and Frederick Gregory argue, even though the prevailing thought is that science was widely accepted, it was always severely scrutinized by intellectuals both with and without strong religious convictions.[67] The interaction between religious and scientific belief during the Victorian faith crisis encouraged a large amount of controversy and disagreement among the intellectuals, where not only religious but also scientific beliefs were contemplated and challenged.

Women's Place in Society

Regarding the history of British feminism, Laura Schwartz has argued that Victorian women viewed Christianity as being the primary cause of their sex-based oppression.[68] While long being ignored in the scholarship of British feminism, the nineteenth and twentieth-century debates on "religion versus secularism" and "Christianity versus Freethinking" were instrumental in forming the British feminist movement. While most Victorian feminists come from a Protestant Christian background, their religious, political, and social platforms were built upon religious

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[64] Turner, "The Victorian Conflict between Science and Religion," 357,368.
[65] Michael Tomko, "Varieties of Geological Experience: Religion, Body and Spirit in Tennyson's "in Memoriam" and Lyell's "Principles of Geology," in *Victorian Poetry* 42, no. 2 (204): 115, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40002777.
[66] Peter Bowler, "Scientific Attitudes to Darwinism in Britain and America," in The Darwinian Heritage, ed. David Kohn (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985), 641.
[67] Fredrick Gregory, "Questioning Scientific Faith in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Zygone: Journal of Religion & Science* 43, no. 3 (2008): 653, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40002777; Paul Jerome Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).
[68] Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 1.

controversy, rather than presenting unified religious stances to support their cause(s).[69] Both Victorian Atheism and Christianity, through theologically progressive ideologies, provided frameworks that allowed women to have more active and prominent roles in society, as evidenced by the lives and works of Harriet Law and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.[70] Gail Houston has explored how Victorian women, both a part of the faith crisis and those outside of it, were able to utilize a "hermeneutics of suspicion" when discussing the theological texts written by men.[71] On the other hand, Josephine Butler, a Victorian social reformer, employed working-class men to help stop the political and medical authority that men had over women and directly called out what she saw as a double standard of sexual morality as un-Christian.[72] The history of British feminism in Victorian Britain shows a complex history of religious beliefs, faith crisis, and women's rights. The responses of more Victorian women who grappled with the role of Christianity in their lives will be explored later in this research.

The Responses from Victorian Christians

While Larsen warns of the danger in pointing to the vast amount of literature written to prove the extent of the faith crisis, he believes that it is obvious that Victorian Christians themselves were worried about the faith crisis affecting the intellectuals.[73] Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford from 1845 to 1869, emerged as a prominent critic of Darwin's theory of

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[69] Ibid.; Olive Anderson, "Women Preachers in Mid-Victorian Britain: Some Reflexions on Feminism, Popular Religion and Social Change," in *The Historical Journal* 12, no. 3 (1969), 467, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X0000724X.
[70] Linda Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 3; Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Pantheon books, 1983), 83-84.
[71] Gail Turley Houston, "Alternative Victorian Religion and the Recuperation of Women's Voices," in *Literature Compass* 13, no. 2 (2016): 105, https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12305.
[72] Chieko Ichikawa, "A Body Politics of Women's Own: Josephine Butler, Social Purity, and National Identity," in *Victorian Review* 41, no. 1 (2015): 107, 109, 112, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24877746; For more of Josephine Butler's commentary on women in Britian, see Josephine Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (London: Horace Marshall, 1896), https://archive.org/details/personalreminis00butlgoog/page/n19/mode/2up.
[73] Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt*, 10.

evolution.[74] In his 1860 review of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), Wilberforce claimed that "few things have more deeply injured the cause of religion than the busy energy which men, narrow and feeble alike in faith and science, have bustled forth to reconcile all new discoveries in physics with the word of inspiration."[75] He later claimed that while he did not doubt Darwin's personal Christianity, Wilberforce "prays" for Darwin to reconsider his theory of evolution due to its' incompatibleness with scripture.[76] Henry Van Dyke in his book, *The Gospel for an Age of Doubt* (1896), does not simply dismiss the doubts of the intellectuals and the critiques they have poised at Christianity, providing personal insight into how one can live with trust in both faith and science.[77] Gilbert K. Chesterton takes a much stronger stance on the issues of the crisis of faith. In his book, *Heretics* (1905), Chesterton, while stressing the importance of an absolute truth, attacks the philosophies of multiple intellectuals, such as Joseph McCabe and George Bernard Shaw.[78] The criticism and debates surrounding the faith crisis did not just occur in the public sphere, but also documented as taking place in the home and radically transforming family dynamics. Harriet Martineau highlighted this in her autobiography (published after her death), how her disillusionment with Christianity led to very strained relations within her family, specifically resulting in no final reconciliation with her older brother, who remained a Unitarian minister.[79] Evidently, the responses from Victorian Christians show the impact the crisis of faith has not only on the doubting intellectuals but also within Christian spheres of influence.

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[74] Colin Gauld, "Wilberforce, Huxley & the Use of History in Teaching about Evolution," in *The American Biology Teacher* 54, no. 7 (1992): 406, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4449529.
[75] "Samuel Wilberforce: On Darwin's Origin of Species, 1860," *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, accessed April 2, 2024, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1860wilberforce-darwin.asp.
[76] Ibid
[77] Henry Van Dyke, *The Gospel for an Age of Doubt* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1900), 6-9, 12, https://archive.org/details/gospelforageofdo0000vand_e1n4/page/8/mode/2up?q=evangelical.
[78] Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London: John Lane, 1908), 286-87, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.79367/page/n7/mode/2up?q=darwin.
[79] Linda Peterson, introduction to *Autobiography: Harriet Martineau* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2007), p. 14.

THE REASONS FOR THE AMERICAN FAITH CRISIS AND RESPONSES

It was the emergence of the online usage of the terms *exvangelical* and *deconstruction*, by both participants and critics of American Evangelicalism that begot this research. Understanding what these terms are, their history, and how they are used is necessary to understand the seemingly recent rise in people leaving American Evangelicalism. These words have cemented their place in the writings and podcasts of both critics and active participants in the American faith crisis. Beginning with *deconstruction*, the word has its' origins in the works of French philosopher, Jacques Derrida.[80] Working within a postmodernism framework, Derrida argued that "there are several possible and plausible interpretations" of any given literary work.[81] John Caputo has explained that *deconstruction* is a framework that shows how texts, ideas, institutions, etc., do not have objectively true and definable meanings.[82] Postmodernism as a philosophical concept was introduced by Jean Francois Lyotard's book, *The Postmodern Condition*, in 1979.[83] While defining postmodernism is a complex task, to understand *deconstruction,* it is important to know that postmodernism is understood as a framework that rejects the idea that truth can be absolute.[84] Naturally, with the idea that there is no objective truth, postmodernism has long been seen to be at odds with traditional Christian doctrine.[85]

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[80] Nathan Smith, *Introduction to Philosophy* (Houston: OpenStax, 2022), section 12.5, https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/12-5-postmodernism

[81] Ibid.

[82] *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,* ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 31, Smith, *Introduction to Philosophy,* section 12.5.

[83] "Postmodernism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* accessed March 25, 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/#pagetopright.

[84] David Ray Griffin, introduction in Varieties of Postmodern Theology (Albany: University of New York, 1989), 3-4, https://archive.org/details/varietiesofpostm0000grif/page/2/mode/2up?q=deconstruction; "Postmodernism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; Nathan Smith, *Introduction to Philosophy, section 12.5.*

[85] For further discussion see Kevin J, Vanhoozer, "Theology and the condition of postmodernity" and "Scripture and tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For an example of Christian commentary on postmodernism, see Douglas Goothuis, "The Postmodernist Challenge to Theology," in *themelios* 25, no. 1 (1999), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-postmodernist-challenge-to-theology/.

Some Christian commentators have argued that *deconstruction* is simply a postmodernist fad leading Christians to apostasy. Carl Trueman, a Christian biblical scholar, plainly states that "the (mis)use of the Derridean d-word gives the whole [movement] a specious veneer of intellectualism and a certain superannuated postmodern chic."[86] Alisa Childers, a Christian apologist, believes that faith deconstruction ends with "often rejecting the beliefs [one] grew up with."[87] A.J. Swoboda, a Christian scholar, defines *deconstruction* as the "dismantling of anything that's been constructed."[88] Regarding the definitions posed by the critics of Evangelicalism themselves, they do not necessarily contradict the Evangelicals' definition. John Williamson of The Deconstructionists podcast defines deconstruction as a process that examines "your faith from the inside looking for potential weakness."[89] Bradley Onishi has described faith deconstruction as "the intentional examination of one's religious faith and beliefs, leading to a profound change in, or even loss of, that faith."[90] Importantly, none of these definitions directly point to Derrida or his definition of deconstruction as a literary critique (though many Christian commentators make the connection).[91] Those actually experiencing the faith crisis and self-identifying as deconstructing rarely point to Derrida or speak of him as having had an impact on

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[86] Carl Trueman, "Josh Harris's Message Remains the Same," *First Things*, August 12, 2021, https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/08/josh-harriss-message-remains-the-same.
[87] Alisa Childers, "No Martin Luther Was Not a Deconstructionist," *Alisa Childers,* March 4, 2024, https://www.alisachildersblog.com/blog/no-martin-luther-was-not-a-deconstructionist.
[88] A.J. Swoboda, *After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith without Losing it* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 7.
[89] Adam Narlock and John Williamson, "Deconstruction: What? And Why?," January 2016, in *The Deconstructionists*, January 2016, podcast, 54:04, https://thedeconstructionists.com/ep-1-deconstruction-what-and-why/.
[90] Bradley Onishi and Olivia Jackson, "The Data on Deconstruction" June 2023, in *Straight White American Jesus*, podcast, 27:09, https://open.spotify.com/episode/6pwOkKdeMiq2HyIDkwzPIS?si=83a31aded058440d.
[91] Childers and Barnett, *The Deconstruction of Christianity,* 15-16; Swoboda, *After Doubt*, 7, 194; The New Evangelicals, ""Conservative" Christian vs "Progressive" Christian," YouTube, November 8, 2023, video 1:45:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H527TsH2qfw.

the dismantling of their faith, leading to the conclusion that the word deconstruction has taken on a more nuanced and popular definition.[92]

In addition to *deconstruction*, *exvangelical* is a word that has become synonymous with the American crisis of faith. Blake Chastain created the Twitter hashtag *#exvangelical* in 2016 and soon started a podcast under the same name.[93] The hashtag has grown dramatically on social media with a never-ending search result on X (formerly known as Twitter) and over 150,400 users on Instagram (current as of March 2024). Additionally, a search on any podcast platform will show several podcasts that include this term in either the show's title or individual episode titles. The use of *deconstruction*(*ism*) and *exvangelical* have helped identify individuals who have left American Evangelicalism for a variety of reasons. While no two deconstruction stories are the same, what follows is an examination of the most prominent, though not all, of the reasons Americans are in a faith crisis.[94]

Politics and Religion

A very prominent reason that individuals give for deconstructing their faith is their recognition, and subsequent disagreement, with Evangelical Americans' strong relationship with right-wing politics. Blake Chastain believes that part of the identity that makes up an Evangelical (and in turn what an *exvangelical* is against) is the belief that "the American way of life is…the best way of life," and that political conservatism, by way of alignment with the Republican Party, is necessary.[95] While there has for a long time been a strong relationship between Evangelicalism

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[92] "Postmodernism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ironically, the subreddit r/Deconstruction clearly defines (in their bio) that the community is about faith deconstruction and NOT Jacques Derrida's philosophical framework, https://www.reddit.com/r/Deconstruction/.

[93] Bradley Onishi, "The Rise of #Exvangelical," in *Religion & Politics*, April 9, 2019, https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical/.

[94] Andrew Herrmann, "Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness: The Fracturing of Fundamentalist Evangelicalism," in *International Review of Qualitative Research* 13, no. 6 (2020): 12, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1940844720937813.

[95] Blake Chastain, ""Exvangelical"-a working definition," *Exvangelical*, March 2, 2019, https://www.exvangelicalpodcast.com/blog/exvangelical-a-working-definition/.

and right-wing politics, it was the successful election of President Donald Trump in 2016, which 81% of American Evangelicals supported, that caused many to begin questioning their faith because they viewed the support of future-President Trump by their fellow Christians as hypocritical.[96] When confronted with President Trump's past behavior, specifically surrounding his comments in a lewd audio clip from 2005, Evangelicals still did not waver in their support.[97] Sentiments like this seemed to be the catalyst for many white Evangelicals to start questioning and/or deconstructing their faith calling out what they saw as hypocrisy within the Evangelical church.[98] Tim Whittaker, founder of *The New Evangelicals* ministry, credits the election of Trump in 2016 as a turning point that caused him to eventually leave Evangelicalism.[99] Content creator *@eve_wasframed* points to her church and family's support of President Trump as one of the reasons she deconstructed and eventually left Christianity altogether.[100] It is hard for Evangelicals to deny that there is no relationship between Evangelicalism and right-wing politics when something such as the "God Bless the USA Bible" is released and promoted by Donald Trump.[101] Or when *Turning Point USA*, a right-wing political organization that advocates for conservative politics in secondary and higher education, created a sub-organization, *Turning*

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[96] Justin Nortey, "Most Americans who regularly attend Worship Services Voted for Trump in 2020," Pew Research Center, August 30, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/30/most-white-americans-who-regularly-attend-worship-services-voted-for-trump-in-2020/.

[97] Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 64-65.

[98] Terry Shoemaker, "Why some Younger Evangelicals are Leaving the Faith," *The Conversation*, July 15, 2021, https://theconversation.com/why-some-younger-evangelicals-are-leaving-the-faith-164230.

[99] The New Evangelicals, "What was your Moment?," Instagram, video, April 10, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cq3LpnPOfZM/.

[100] Phil Drysdale, "142- Eve Was Framed," YouTube video, 1:43:17, June 10, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cMuhXwNDIE&t=203s; @eve_wasframed, "My Story," Facebook, video, July 29, 2023, 2:56, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=610418827798884. *@eve_wasframed*, while being a prominent figure within deconstructionist circles, has not made her legal name public, hence why her social media username is used.

[101] "Home," God Bless the USA Bible, accessed https://godblesstheusabible.com/

Point Faith to encourage an even more intimate relationship between conservative politics and Christianity.[102]

Bradley Onishi and Dan Miller, two former ministers who left Evangelicalism and became religious scholars, have documented in their podcast, *Straight White American Jesus*, the connection between American Evangelicalism and Christian Nationalism. Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry have argued that Christian Nationalism, as a cultural framework, is an "ideology incorporating a number of beliefs and values."[103] In an attempt to define and measure Christian Nationalism within America, the *Public Religion Research Institution* (PRRI) focused on 5 beliefs that constitute Christian Nationalism: (1) that God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society; (2) that the U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation; (3) being Christian is an important part of being American; (4) that if we move away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country; and (5) that U.S. laws should be based on Christian values.[104] PRRI found that 10% of Americans were supporters and 20% were sympathizers of Christian Nationalism. Additionally, the PRRI found that the faith tradition that contained the largest number of supporters/sympathizers was religiously active white Evangelical Protestants.[105] A prominent voice in deconstructionist spaces, Mason Mennenga, believes that Christian Nationalism has not only had a long history in American society/politics but that it "poses a dangerous threat to humanity."[106] Interestingly, Onishi believes that the rise of *exvangelicals* has the "potential for undermining Evangelical politics" due

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[102] "Biblical Citizenship in Modern America," Patriot Academy, accessed March 30, 2024, https://coach.patriotacademy.com/tpf/.
[103] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God* 23, 25.
[104] "Support for Christian Nationalism in all 50 States: Findings from PRRI's 2023 American Values Atlas," PRRI, February 28, 2024, https://www.prri.org/research/support-for-christian-nationalism-in-all-50-states/.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Mason Mennenga, "Why Christian Nationalism is Dangerous," YouTube, November 3, 2022, video, 10:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMQq-KDA6IY.

to former members of Evangelicalism having the more comprehensive knowledge needed to argue against current Evangelicals' political beliefs.[107] While the history of American Evangelicalism has been covered extensively, further scholarly research needs to be undertaken to understand how the relationship between Evangelicals and right-wing (moderate and extreme) politics is causing people to leave American Evangelicalism.

The Evangelical Stance on Gender and Sexual Identity

Individuals experiencing a faith crisis often discuss the teachings of purity and sexual ethics found within American Evangelicalism. This issue is quite complex, as it focuses on both the inclusion of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning (LGBTQ+) communities and the role of women in society, marriage, and the church. David Gushee, author of *After Evangelicalism* and *Changing our Minds*, has shared his experience as an Evangelical and his eventual departure from Evangelicalism.[108] Gushee argues this removal from Evangelicalism was due to his questioning of the traditional religious doctrine and his activism for the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community into Evangelical America, though he later saw a need to purposefully distance himself from Evangelicalism.[109] Link Neal, co-host of the *Ear Biscuits* podcast, directly credits the exclusion and negative treatment of the LGBTQ+ community as the main cause for his complete departure from Christianity.[110] Drew McCoy, creator of the YouTube channel, *Genetically Modified Skeptic*, argues that the only thing the Christian church taught him about the LGBTQ+ community was that "LGBT people are responsible for AIDS, and they go out clubbing

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[107] Onishi, "The Rise of #Exvangelical."
[108] David Gushee, *After Evangelicalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 23.
[109] Gary Allen Taylor and Daivid Gushee, "Ep. 48: Why I Deconstructed Evangelicalism," April 2022, in *Holy Heretics: Losing Religion and Finding Jesus*, produced by the Sophia Society, podcast, 54:06, https://open.spotify.com/episode/6kWxJuqjwJK6w1xhkhLHE3?si=d8d2e832bcfc4fbc.
[110] Link Neal, "Link's Spiritual Deconstruction," YouTube, February 16, 2020, video, 1:37:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1AZhlyoD9s.

and drinking, and there's massive drug problems."[111] Concurrently, April Ajoy and Beecher Reuning have documented their journey from having a heteronormative marriage based on conservative Evangelicalism, to each of them embracing their queer identities and becoming a "queer couple that the church doesn't know how to handle."[112] These narratives surrounding the LGBTQ+ community underscore dissatisfaction with American Evangelicalism's teachings and have led to the eventual departure from Evangelicalism for many individuals.

While there can be a variety of beliefs on women's role in marriage and society, most deconstructionists argue that within Evangelicalism there is a strict order that women (and men to a smaller extent) must follow to remain a good Christian.[113] Kathryn Klement and Brad Sagarin argue that purity culture "value[s] and idealize[s] women for their virginity and femininity."[114] "Purity Culture" is a complex, but widely used term to encompass the vast amount of sexual ethics and relationship beliefs that Evangelicalism began to push, as Bullivant sees, in response to the seemingly "permeant sexual revolution of the 1960s."[115] Andrew Herrmann has argued that the idea of "sexual purity is fetishized" within Evangelicalism.[116] Stephen Bullivant's research also points to this view of purity culture as he recounts a story of a teenage girl who publicly dedicated herself before God and claimed to become a "born-again virgin."[117] Within this Evangelical purity culture, women are taught that it is their responsibility to maintain their purity and prevent men from sinning since (in many Evangelical teachings) men are blameless due to

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[111] Drew McCoy, "How Conservative Christianity "Groomed" Us," YouTube, July 26, 2023, video, 45:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvDqd-K0JKQ, (for quote begin at 26:32).
[112] Beecher Reuning and April Ajoy, "Intro: What is a Non-Binary Marriage," March 2022, in *The Non-Binary Marriage*, podcast, 34:18, https://open.spotify.com/episode/5H3NYd141c5a68042b8
[113] Blake Chastain, ""Exvangelical"-a working definition," *Exvangelical*, March 2, 2019, https://www.exvangelicalpodcast.com/blog/exvangelical-a-working-definition/.
[114] Kathryn Klement and Brad Sagarin, "Nobody Want to Date a Whore: Rape-Supportive Messages in Women-Directed Christian Dating Book," in *Sexuality & Culture* 21 (2017): 207, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-016-9390-x.
[115] Bullivant, *Nonverts*, 136.
[116] Hermann, "Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness," 9.
[117] Bullivant, *Nonverts*, 135.

their "God-given strong libido."[118] This is an idea supported by and routinely brought up in the deconstructing stories of individuals leaving Evangelicalism. Linda Klein has recounted how much of her "energy" in proving she was a good Christian was spent on making sure she was "utterly free of sexual thought, free of sexual feelings, [and] certainly not inspiring sexual thoughts and feelings in others."[119] April Ajoy has discussed how she was introduced at an early age to the concept of "purity" and how her father, starting when she was around 12 years old, "would brag from the pulpit that [she] was dating [herself], and [she] was a virgin."[120] Similarly, the host of the *Hello Deconstructionists podcast*, Maggie, directly blames how Evangelicals treated women and Evangelical teaching surrounding sex for her faith crisis and eventual exit from the church.[121] The stories of those navigating the faith crisis publicly shed light on the profound impact these purity teachings have had on those parts of Evangelical culture. Evangelicals' stance on gender and sexual orientation is complex, encompassing nuanced dynamics of power, control, and theological beliefs. Moving forward, *exvangelicals* argue that there needs to be a greater understanding and inclusivity for all, regardless of one's gender or sexual orientation.

Responses from Evangelicals

The individuals deconstructing and publicly critiquing Evangelicalism have not gone unnoticed by American Christians. The responses from Evangelicals can be just as varied as those deconstructing their faith (which will be explored later in this research). Dustin Messer, writing

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[118] Hermann, "Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness," 9-10.
[119] CBS News, "Deconstructing My Religion," YouTube, March 29, 2022, video, 26:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy9I1lwCgBY.
[120] Laura Anderson, Andrew Kerbs, Beecher, Reuning, and April Ajoy, "Choosing Relationship over Doctrine," March 2024, in *Sunday School Dropouts,* produced by the Center for Trauma Resolution and Recovery, podcast, 1:30:11, https://open.spotify.com/episode/0eQZyoEjg35Wn7Wd0WmEbb?si=577a81832e6f4603 (quote begins at 20:10).
[121] Christinsanity, "Deconstructing Christianity-with Maggie from "Hello Deconstructionists" podcast, YouTube, February 5, 2024, video, 59:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQ_jSkKbH4M.
Absence of a last name for Maggie is due to her never having made her full name public.

for *The Gospel Coalition*, warns that the issue exvangelicals face is the "temptation to forever fixate, with great resentment, on what's in the" past, warning those deconstructing to develop new beliefs rather than solely focusing on what they no longer believe.[122] Ben Sternke believes that deconstruction "is the process whereby people actually do try to hold on to their faith rather than jettison faith completely."[123] A. J. Swoboda and John Marriot have written on how a deconstruction of one's faith does not necessitate a loss of faith, as long as there is reconstruction.[124] Additionally, Swoboda acknowledges rather than rejecting Jesus or Christianity outright, individuals in a faith crisis could be rejecting a false and fundamentalistic religiosity.[125] Then there are Evangelicals, such as Tim Barnett and Alisa Childers, who are adamantly against the "positive use" of the word deconstruction to simply describe a faith crisis.[126] They go as far as to claim that deconstruction "began with Satan" and that the serpent, in the Biblical account of the Fall, deconstructed the understanding of God and deceived Eve into eating the "forbidden fruit."[127] Childers further stresses what she sees as the "dangers" of Christians using the word deconstruction because of the term's postmodernism history.[128] It is clear that the response to those questioning American Evangelicalism can be quite complex.

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[122] Dustin Messer, "Move Beyond Exvangelicalism," *The Gospel Coalition*, December 23, 2022, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/moving-beyond-exvangelicalism/.

[123] Seminary Now, "What is Deconstruction? Is Deconstruction a bad thing?," YouTube, January 9, 2024, video, 8:51, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-xn24KCMHY&list=PL_cWEuPgQ52qPbockmRD2vZcpdRB7Huzl. Sternke says the cause for the rise in people deconstructing is because of how "predominately white Evangelical church leaders" have responded to different cultural movements in the last few decades (an idea very much supported by those deconstructing).

[124] Swoboda, *After Doubt*, 183-191; Sean McDowell and John Marriott, *Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe Without Sinking Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023).

[125] Swoboda, *After Doubt*, 40-41; Skye Jethani and A. J. Swoboda, "Ep. 454: Dangers, Doubts, & Deconstruction with A.J. Swoboda," April 2021, in *The Holy Post,* podcast, 1:18:37, *https*://open.spotify.com/episode/0OxJ0R8Cq5w7PPQ92obxqY?si=12b6046b08b3449c, (notable timesteps 42:20, 1:00:00).

[126] Childers and Barnett, *The Deconstruction of Christianity*, 17-18.

[127] Ibid., 29-31.

[128] John Cooper and Alisa Childers, "Ep. 199-What is Deconstruction and Why it's Dangerous w/Alisa Childers," February 2024, in *Cooper Stuff Podcast,* podcast, 1:03:35, https://open.spotify.com/episode/6s6xL0bfjzlT0p5WhQhgl8?si=9823fc843e14471c.

THE WHO'S WHO OF THE FAITH CRISES

Within both the American and Victorian crises of faiths, individuals have had similar reasons for their grappling with their faith, but their resulting theological and philosophical beliefs can vary significantly, which proves the nuanced nature of these faith crises. As will be shown in the following section of this paper, defining an individual experiencing a crisis of faith can be difficult due to the diverse conclusion they settle on, even though there are common reasons for leaving their current faith tradition. This section will include two parts, the first is an exploration of the individuals involved in the Victorian faith crisis, not solely focusing on the traditionally perceived intellectuals who lost faith, but also looking at the complex stories of others involved in the crisis. The second part will examine the wide spectrum of those involved in the American crisis of faith, drawing on the extensive primary research conducted for this project.

Not Every Victorian Was a Hardened Atheist

During the Victorian crisis of faith, intellectuals dealt with a diverse range of beliefs beyond the types of intellectuals usually focused on. While attention often centers on outspoken atheists, such as Charles Bradlaugh, or the agnostic scientist, as typified by Charles Darwin, it is essential to acknowledge the wide spectrum of complex and nuanced individuals who were questioning their religious traditions. Joseph Baker, who began as a quite popular Methodist minister, is a perfect example of an often-neglected figure who was radically important during the Victorian period. Being expelled from his denomination by 1841, Baker would go on to be an influential member of the Victorian Freethought movement.[129] The Freethought movement, by way of critiquing organized and orthodox religion, particularly Christianity, aimed to rid society of "false and repressive belief systems."[130] During Baker's life, Bradlaugh was quoted as saying

[129] Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt*, 79, 112.
[130] Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 2.

that "any work, purporting to be a record of Freethinkers, the name of Joseph Barker cannot be omitted."[131] Even so, Baker's contributions to Victorian Freethought have largely been ignored in historical research, up until recently, due to his conversion back to a theologically orthodox Christianity in 1863.[132] There were undoubtedly many Victorian intellectuals who did not convert back to Christianity but still struggled to justify their emerging scientific beliefs with their previous religious upbringing and beliefs.[133] For example, George John Romanes, who became a close personal friend of Charles Darwin, continued to deny the validity of religion while at the same time expressing remorse for coming to that conclusion.[134] Far from being a hardened atheist, Romanes' writings point to the complexities that an individual could maintain while participating in the crisis of faith.

Within the discussion of intellectuals, women stand out as having had unique and volatile roles in the Victorian crisis of faith, though they are largely overlooked. A prominent author of the nineteenth century who went on to publicly critique Christianity, Mary Ann Evans (pen name George Eliot), is the only woman usually discussed along with male intellectuals in scholarship covering the Victorians' crisis of faith. In a letter to her father, dated February 28, 1842, Eliot documented her distrust in the scriptures as "histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction."[135] In this letter, and her subsequent works, Eliot rejected the "expected vocations of dutiful, obedient daughter and future pious wife.[136] Additionally, Harriet Martineau was a writer and journalist who had the cultural and societal influence to be able to share her opinions on organized religion and the benefit of "rationalism." In her autobiography, published posthumously in 1877,

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[131] Larsen, *Contested Christianity*, 80.
[132] Larsen, *Contested Christianity,* 80, 83.
[133] Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline,* 22.
[134] Turner, "The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith That was Lost," 22-23.
[135] "Selections from George Eliot's Letters," ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 21, https://archive.org/details/selectionsfromge00elio/page/20/mode/2up?view=theater.
[136] Turner, "The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith That was Lost," 28.

Martineau publicly recounted her eventual turn to agnosticism from Unitarian Christianity. Mrs. Humphry Ward (Mary Augusta) is considered to have written one of the "best-selling 'quality' novel[s] of the century," *Robert Elsmere.*[137] One will not be surprised to learn the focus of the books is on one man's faith journey as he eventually becomes disillusioned with the established church and leaves his faith to work among the poor of London.[138] Through their writings on religion, morality, and societal norms, Victorian women played significant roles in the intellectual and religious debates of the nineteenth century and greatly contributed to the broader 'crisis of faith' experienced by Victorian intellectuals.

Americans: A Complex Group of Those in Crisis

Much like the Victorians, the people who are a part of the American faith crisis contain a variety of views and beliefs now that they have left American Evangelicalism. There has been criticism against those who have deconstructed as never actually having faith or were not a "real Christian," though this idea has been scrutinized.[139] Tim Whittaker and *@Deconstruction Girl* argue that this type of argument casts doubt on the authenticity of all Christians, not just those who deconstruct their faith.[140] In truth, deconstruction does not automatically necessitate a disbelief in Christianity. For instance, A.J. Swoboda recounts how he went through his own deconstruction experience and still came out believing in an orthodox understanding of

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[137] John Sutherland, *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 539.
[138] Mrs. Humphry Ward, *Robert Elsmere* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888). https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/24898/pg24898-images.html.
[139] Sean McDowell, "The Deconstruction of Christianity," YouTube, December 28, 2023, video, 1:08:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtJr6XeDMWI; Todd Friel, "The Eye-Opening Reason That So Many Deconstruct Their Faith," YouTube, February 13, 2023, video, 11:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxLv-vBRFp8.
[140] Tim Whittaker and Deconstruction Girl, "Conversation with a Sinfluencer," February 2024, in *The New Evangelicals Podcast,* podcast, 47:14, https://open.spotify.com/episode/2mHLLJznQZnw1mSWg2ox9F?si=a74f35d8192a44e7. The creator *@Deconstruction Girl* has not made her legal name public.

Christianity.[141] Recording artist Lecrae also has documented how his deconstruction journey was "needed to reestablish his faith."[142] Returning to Whittaker, his story exemplifies that of someone who reconstructed a more theologically "progressive" interpretation of Christianity, straying from multiple American Evangelicals' core beliefs, such as the inerrancy of scripture and the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community.[143] At the same time, he still holds to some traditional Evangelical beliefs, such as trust in the Resurrection of Jesus.[144]

Outside of both traditional and progressive understandings of Christianity, complex beliefs about spirituality and faith exist. For example, Lisa Gungor, a former Christian musician, has publicly shared her journey of leaving Evangelical Christianity. She has since explored a multitude of different paths and now embraces the concept of God as a "Divine Mother."[145] Kevin Garcia, self-identifying as a spirituality coach, wants to "teach people how to have a relationship with a thing we call God," though his understanding of "God" is not limited to any singular Christian interpretation.[146] To portray everyone who is part of this faith crisis as still containing some type of faith in Christian beliefs (or any religious beliefs) is not a fair assessment either. Drew McCoy has explored how the doubts brought up from his family's involvement in an essential oils scam and what he saw as the hypocrisy of Evangelicalism's teachings caused him to

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[141] Preston Sprinkle and A. J. Swoboda, "Deconstruction, Progressive Christianity, and our Cultural Moment: Dr. A.J. Swoboda," September 2020, in *Theology in the Raw,* podcast, 1:15:00. https://open.spotify.com/episode/5zZuPpX9hFldXOytebcjZ8?si=08dd300168cc4c72.

[142] Lecrae Moore, *I Am Restored* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2020), 50; Lecrae, "I Deconstructed-This is What Happened," YouTube, November 14, 2023, video, 52:51, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDNGp_XEoAo.

[143] The New Evangelicals, ""Conservative" Christian vs "Progressive" Christian," YouTube, November 8, 2023, video, 1:45:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H527TsH2qfw.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Justin Wilford and Lisa Gungor, "Finding the Sacred After Religion with Lisa Gungor," December 2023, in *The Yes Collective Podcast with Justin Wilford, PhD,* podcast, 1:00:11, https://open.spotify.com/episode/08ZEWDdDYkHP8u48Dr5Fzy?si=973a0a785c1d40aa; Lisa Gungor, *The Most Beautiful Thing I've Seen* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 91-94.

[146] Josh Patterson and Kevin Garcia, "Cultivating a Devotional Practice to Jesus Outside of the Church-With Kevin Garcia," February 2024, in *Rethinking Faith,* Podcast, 1:08:29, https://open.spotify.com/episode/1iTmK5zlcb6Df94ICBW4cL?si=39bd643ca47e4a20.

deconstruction and led to him leaving religion altogether.[147] The creator of the YouTube channel Ex-Fundie Diaries, Elly, has documented her story from growing up in an abusive Evangelical family to a brief following of Progressive Christianity, and her eventual turn to atheism, in her own words, she kept "deconstructing until there was nothing left."[148] As mentioned earlier, each person navigating the American faith crisis has a unique story, the stories presented here illustrate that deconstruction does not always lead to disbelief in Christianity, with some embracing a more theologically progressive Christian tradition, some turning to atheism, and everything in-between.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from this research that faith crises are not unique to one specific time or location. We have seen that the Victorian and American faith crises share striking similarities in the type of criticisms, the diverse range of beliefs, and the complex responses from Christians. One of the biggest takeaways from this comparative analysis has been that while it can be understood what the causes of these two faith crises were, it is quite challenging to isolate one specific example that summarizes an individual's experience while in a faith crisis. Participants in both the Victorian and American crises went on to believe in a variety of diverse ways, both within and outside of religion. Due to American Evangelicalism being "a trans-denominational phenomenon," it is unsurprising that almost every denomination in America is being affected, much like how the faith crisis of the Victorians affected both individuals in the established church and Nonconformist denominations.[149] Similarly, the types of responses from the Christian community towards the faith crises, within both the American and Victorian contexts, are just as

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[147] Drew McCoy, "What was it like to leave Evangelical Christianity as a married couple," YouTube, April 29, 2022, video, 37:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_6KjO96jH4; Drew McCoy, "3 Christian Teachings That Made Me Leave the Church," January 24, 2024, video, 14:57, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QdqQeYdKDk&t=1s.
[148] Ex-Fundie Diaries, "My Faith Deconstruction, Why I'm No Longer a Christian," YouTube, October 1, 2020, video, 17:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntJKzz-pqJs. Absence of a last name for Elly is due to her never having made her full name public.
[149] Bullivant, *Nonverts*, 3

equally diverse as the critiques. Debates surrounding the rights, roles, and sexual freedom of women have taken prominent roles within both the time of the Victorians and in America. Additionally, doubts surrounding the compatibleness of science with scripture and biblical literalism continue to have a place within Christian faith crises. Furthermore, politics and religion have always been interconnected within Evangelicalism, though this is a bigger catalyst for doubt among American Evangelicals.

The remarkable similarities between the current American crisis of faith within Evangelicalism and the Victorian crisis of faith in nineteenth-century Britain highlight the enduring relevance of the questions and debates surrounding faith, doubt, and (un)belief within Christianity. By examining the historical and religious contexts shaping these crises and exploring the criticisms voiced by those departing, this research reveals the depth of challenges to the Christian faith that have evolved over time. This comparative approach has assisted in identifying common challenges, shown the evolving nature of the terminology used within each crisis, provided nuanced explanations of who was/is part of the faith crises, and enabled one with a more complex understanding of the history between religion, culture, and society across different historical periods. Through this analysis, one can gain insight into the persistent inquiries into the nature of belief and the dynamics of religious change that transcends time and geography.

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